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Distinguishing Implicit from Explicit Brand Attitudes in Brand Placement Research

Annemarie M. Wennekers, Lisa Vandenberg, Kim Zoon, Eva A. van Reijmersdal

1 Introduction

Brand placement is a popular topic, both in business and academia. Brands are placed in a wide-ranging array of media, including television programs, movies, radio shows, magazines, games, music videos, and websites. Expenditures on brand placement are still growing (PQ Media, 2013), as well as the number of scientific studies on the effects of brand placements (for reviews see Balusubramanian, Karrh, & Patwardhan, 2006; Van Reijmersdal, Neijens, & Smit, 2009). These studies have contributed to the knowledge about explicit (deliberative, conscious, or intentional) brand placement effects, but little is known about whether and how brand placements affect consumers' implicit (associative, unconscious, or automatic) responses toward the placed brand.

1.1 Brand placement research in a nutshell

A large number of studies have shown that brand placements affect consumers' responses toward the placed brand, such as their memory of the brand (e.g., Russell, 2002; Van Reijmersdal, 2011; Scott & Craig-Lees, 2010), their attitudes toward the brand (e.g., DeGregorio & Sung, 2010; Miles Homer, 2009; Redondo, 2012) and their intention to purchase the brand (e.g., Morton & Friedman, 2002; Van Reijmersdal, Jansz, Peters, & Van Noort, 2010). These studies have examined different types of placements and consumer responses, but they share one characteristic: a focus on self-report measures of brand placement effects. That is, participants were instructed to explicitly list the brands they remembered from a previously presented program, to rate their liking for these brands and to report their intention to buy the brands.

However, brand placements are embedded in the media content and thus do not receive viewers' sole or main focus of attention. As a result, brand placements might not always affect explicit consumer cognitions and evaluations, but could still have an impact by means of more low-attention or implicit processes. Any such implicit effects could be highly beneficial for a brand, because implicit processes have shown to better predict certain (more automatic) behaviors than explicit processes (Dovidio, Kawakami & Gaertner, 2002; Galdi, Arcuri & Gawronski, 2008; Shapiro & Krishnan, 2001). Only a limited number of studies

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have investigated implicit brand placement effects so far (e.g., Auty & Lewis, 2004; Hang, 2012; Law & Braun, 2004; Van Reijmersdal, Rozendaal & Buijzen, 2012; Yang & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2007), most of which focused on implicit brand memory or implicit choice measures, neglecting implicit attitude effects (for an exception see Redker, Gibson, & Zimmerman, 2013). Therefore, more research is needed to investigate these implicit brand placement processes, especially on the level of brand attitudes.

1.2 Overview of the chapter

The goal of the present chapter is to shed more light on the role of implicit evaluative processes in brand placement effects by discussing the importance of studying effects of brand placement on implicit brand attitudes. The next part will present a short background on the distinction between implicit and explicit attitudes, and predictions are discussed for the effects that different types of brand placements might have on these two types of attitudes. Then, example studies testing brand placement effects on explicit versus implicit attitudes are discussed in light of these predictions. The chapter closes with a summary of the most urgent directions for future research in this area.

2 Distinguishing implicit from explicit attitudes

2.1 Processes, measures, and outcomes

According to dual-process models of attitudes (e.g., Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006; Strack & Deutsch, 2004), evaluations can be the outcome of two distinct processes that affect different types of attitudes. From these perspectives, explicit attitudes are the outcome of propositional or rule-based processes, whereas implicit attitudes are based on associative processes. The first evaluative process is characterized by propositional reasoning and results in explicit validation or rejection of beliefs and evaluations. Applied to brand placement, having seen your favorite soap actor consuming Coca Cola might induce the following thought process: “I like character X + character X likes Coca Cola = I like Coca Cola”. As a result of this propositional reasoning, you indicate a favorable attitude toward Coke on a questionnaire.

The second evaluative process is based on associative processes that require little cognitive capacity or effort. Associative evaluations are defined as the affective reactions that become automatically activated when encountering a stimulus (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006). For example, imagine a program in which a brand logo is repeatedly displayed in the vicinity of an attractive character. The positive reactions evoked by the attractive character may become associated with the brand by means of affective transfer or misattribution. When people are later exposed to the brand, these positive associations are automati-

cally re-activated, which can manifest in the performance on indirect attitude measures.

Thus, explicit attitudes should be distinguished from implicit attitudes, both of which are the result of different evaluative processes and can be measured with distinctive procedures. The defining difference between measurement procedures of explicit and implicit attitudes is that the first are direct assessments of attitudes using self-report and introspection, whereas the second are indirect assessments, meaning that responses on a task are used to *infer* the attitude (Nosek, Hawkins, & Frazier, 2011). Examples of indirect measures of implicit attitudes are reaction-time measures based on categorization principles such as the Implicit Association Test (IAT; Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998) or on priming techniques such as the Evaluative Priming Task (Fazio, Sanbonmatsu, Powell, & Kardes, 1986). For further explanation of these tasks see the chapter of Vandenberg, Wennekers, Murre, and Smit in this book. Importantly, explicit and implicit attitudes have been found to predict different kinds of behaviors. Explicit attitudes have been found to influence deliberative behaviors that people have considered carefully, whereas implicit attitudes guide more spontaneous or impulsive behaviors (Dovidio et al., 2002). Within consumer behavior, deliberative product choices or purchase intentions could be distinguished from impulsive purchases or choices made while being distracted (Frieese, Hofmann, & Wänke, 2008; Gibson, 2008).

Research on implicit processes has become prominent in many areas of psychology in the past decades (for a review see Nosek et al., 2011). Within consumer research, the study of implicit processes is still in its infancy (Dimofte, 2010). A reason might be that several researchers have highlighted that implicit and explicit measures in a consumption context are relatively highly correlated (Perkins, Forehand, Greenwald, & Maison, 2008). Still, instances in which this is not the case are of crucial interest, because they imply that different processes are at play. A call for research by Madhavaram and Appan (2010) emphasizes the need for more research on implicit attitudes in the context of marketing communications. This need is especially urgent in brand placement research, since there are interesting hypotheses regarding effects on implicit attitudes and thus far only few studies that have started to explore these predictions.

2.2 *Predictions for brand placement research*

As discussed above, implicit and explicit attitudes are the result of different processes and should thus be susceptible to different kinds of influences or manipulations. Applied to brand placement research, several predictions can be made for the impact of different kinds of placements on these two types of attitudes. Two important factors emerge from the literature: prominence of the placement and influence of the valence of the placement context.

2.2.1 Brand placement prominence

Prominence has been defined in different ways, but a primary characteristic in these definitions is centrality of position of the placement. That is, Gupta and Lord (1998) consider a placement to be prominent when the brand is at the center of attention, and Gibson, Redker and Zimmerman (2014) emphasize that prominence is increased when a brand is centrally connected to the plot, used by a central character, talked about, or is one of the few brands used in the program. Previous papers have highlighted that implicit processes are especially likely to occur when the placements are not prominent (Van Reijmersdal, 2009), but more subtle instead, such as in the background of the media program (Redker et al., 2013).

This prediction is also in line with the notion of associative and propositional processes underlying implicit and explicit attitudes. That is, propositional thought is especially likely when people deliberately process the placement, which is more likely in prominent placement situations. Thus, prominent placements should impact explicit brand attitudes. Whether these effects on explicit attitudes are positive or negative depends on the content of people's thoughts. These could be affected by their liking of the show and the character using the brand, or their persuasion knowledge (e.g., Van Reijmersdal, 2009). In contrast, more associative processes could come into play for subtle placements. These placements may not be processed intentionally or even consciously, but may be analyzed automatically or preattentively (Krugman, 1977). The associations that result from this automatic processing should become apparent from implicit measures.

To summarize, the following prediction can be made for the effect of placement prominence on explicit and implicit attitudes.

Prediction 1: Placement of a brand in media content will predominantly affect a) explicit brand attitudes in case of prominent placements and b) implicit brand attitudes in case of subtle placements.

2.2.2 Valence of the brand placement context

Regardless of whether the focus is on explicit or implicit brand attitudes, for brand managers it is of utmost importance to gain insight into the direction of brand placement effects. In other words, does the placement affect attitudes in a positive or negative way? One of the questions of interest is whether the context of the placement – such as the media content in which the brand is placed – affects subsequent brand attitudes. For example, does placement in a positive context (e.g., a comedy show or a scene with a positive valence) affect attitudes positively, whereas placement in a negative context (e.g., a drama series or a scene with a negative valence) negatively impacts brand attitudes? Evaluative

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conditioning principles predict such a transfer of affect; repeatedly coupling a stimulus with a positive or negative stimulus results in a change of evaluation of the original stimulus, such that repeated coupling with a positive [negative] stimulus makes the original stimulus more positive [negative] (e.g., De Houwer, Thomas, & Baeyens, 2001).

The question is whether such evaluative conditioning effects occur in brand placement and whether it affects explicit and/or implicit attitudes. De Houwer (2007) describes evaluative conditioning as an effect that can be a result of distinct processes that range in nature from propositional to more associative (see also Jones, Olson, & Fazio, 2010). As a result, in cases where the placement is prominent and clearly linked to positive or negative information, valence is expected to transfer to explicit brand attitudes. Oppositely, in cases of subtle placements the link between the brand and the (valence of the) media content is less obvious. However, brand attitudes could still be affected by valence of the media content through associative processes, which should become apparent on implicit attitude measures.

Prediction 2: Valence of the media content in which the brand is placed could predominantly transfer to a) explicit brand attitudes in case of prominent placements and b) implicit brand attitudes in case of subtle placements.

However, there is a possible alternative prediction, namely that brand attitudes are not susceptible to the valence of the media content. Potentially, mere exposure principles have a stronger effect than evaluative conditioning principles, such that repeated exposure to a brand results in more positive evaluations, regardless of the context in which the brand is presented. These effects are most likely to occur when people do not explicitly remember the placements (Zajonc, 1980; 2001), such as when the placements were subtle. As a result, mere exposure principles rather than evaluative conditioning effects may mainly affect implicit attitudes. This alternative prediction is formulated as follows:

Prediction 2_alternative: Valence of the media content in which the brand is placed might not transfer to implicit brand attitudes in case of subtle placements. Instead, mere exposure to subtle brand placements – compared to no placement - affects implicit brand attitudes positively (regardless of valence of the media content).

3 Implicit versus explicit attitudes in brand placement research

In the previous section, hypotheses have been generated regarding the effects of brand placements on implicit versus explicit attitudes. In the present section, available studies will be reviewed to provide preliminary tests of these

hypotheses. A quick Web of Science literature search with the terms ‘implicit attitudes’ and ‘brand placement’ generated 18 results. Of these articles, 11 focused on implicit memory instead of implicit attitudes, and 4 were theoretical in nature. In fact, only 3 articles studied effects of brand placement on implicit brand attitudes. These articles will be reviewed briefly in this section, supplemented with our own work in progress on implicit versus explicit brand attitude effects of brand placements. This section follows the outline of predictions from the previous section.

3.1 Testing prediction 1: The effect of brand placement prominence on explicit and implicit brand attitudes

3.1.1 Prominent brand placements

The brand placement literature contains many demonstrations of effects of prominent brand placements on explicit attitudes. However, most of these studies did not measure implicit brand attitudes and thus do not allow for a direct comparison of effects on these two types of attitudes. A recent article by Gibson and colleagues (2014) is an exception. In two experiments, they studied the effects of prominent placements (of sports brand Nike by a central character of TV-show *Friends*) on explicit brand attitudes (7-point semantic differentials) and implicit brand attitudes (IAT). Participants watched one of three episodes that either included a visual and verbal brand placement (i.e., the use and mentioning of the brand), a visual only brand placement (i.e., the use of the brand without mentioning), or no brand placement. After the episode they completed a brand recall measure, and the explicit and implicit attitude measures. In both experiments, the sample as a whole showed no effects of (the type of) brand placement on both explicit and implicit attitudes. However, exploratory analyses on a smaller subset of the sample showed that for people who recalled seeing the brand, explicit brand attitudes were more positive than for people who did not recall seeing the brand (note that recall differed between types of placement, see for details Gibson et al., 2014). This same pattern was found for implicit brand attitudes in the first experiment, but no effects on implicit brand attitudes were found in the second experiment. Thus, clear explicit effects of prominent brand placements emerged, but the implicit findings are yet inconclusive. Interestingly, the second experiment also contained a persuasion knowledge manipulation, which affected the direction of effects for explicit brand attitudes. For people that were not primed with persuasion knowledge, those who recalled seeing the brand had more positive explicit brand attitudes than those who did not recall seeing the brand. However, the opposite occurred for people that were primed with persuasion knowledge, such that explicit brand attitudes were less positive for those who recalled seeing the brand.

The results of this article are thus largely in line with prediction 1a that prominent placements should predominantly predict explicit brand attitudes. However, more research is needed to further study potential effects of prominent placements on implicit brand attitudes.

3.1.2 Subtle brand placements

Redker and colleagues (2013) were the first to compare effects of subtle brand placements on implicit and explicit brand attitudes. Specifically, they studied whether peoples' liking of a movie genre affected their implicit and explicit brand attitudes after watching a movie that did or did not contain background brand placements. Based on a pre-test, lovers and haters of science-fiction movies with no pre-existing preference for either Coca-Cola or Pepsi were invited to participate in the main study. In the experiment, they watched a 45-minute clip of science-fiction movie *Blade Runner*, which either contained 4 short background placements of Coca-Cola or did not contain Coca-Cola placements. The results showed that in the no-placement control condition, haters and lovers of the movie genre had similar implicit attitudes toward Coca-Cola versus Pepsi. In the placement condition, the genre lovers had more positive implicit brand attitudes toward Coca-Cola versus Pepsi than the genre haters. Thus, subtle brand placements affected implicit brand attitudes as a function of movie genre liking. No effects of the placement or liking of the movie genre were found on explicit brand attitudes.

In our own work (Wennekers, Vandeberg, Zoon, & van Reijmersdal, in progress), we manipulated subtle brand placements by repeatedly placing logos (of water brand Evian) in the periphery (corners of the screen) of a reality TV-show (*MasterChef*) for a short duration of time. Implicit attitudes (Single-Target IATs) toward the placed brand versus a non-placed competitor were affected positively by subtle brand placements compared to a no-placement control condition. Thus, subtle brand placements had a positive impact on implicit brand attitudes. No effects of the placement were found on explicit brand attitudes (7-point semantic differentials).

Together with the Redker et al. (2013) study, these results are in line with prediction 1b that subtle brand placements predominantly affect implicit brand attitudes. In fact, in both studies peoples' explicit attitudes remained unaffected by the subtle placements.

3.1.3 Conclusion

In short, the studies discussed in this section suggest that brand placement prominence indeed differently affects explicit and implicit brand attitudes. In line with our predictions, the available evidence shows that prominent placements mainly affect explicit brand attitudes, whereas subtle placements mainly

impact implicit brand attitudes. Still, empirical tests of these predictions are scarce and future studies are necessary to enhance insight into the influence of placement prominence on explicit versus implicit brand attitudes. Specifically, varying degrees of prominence should be directly compared. Moreover, implicit and explicit effects on brand attitudes should be tested with a direct comparison of prominent and subtle placements.

3.2 *Testing prediction 2: The effect of valence of the brand placement context on explicit and implicit brand attitudes*

3.2.1 *Prominent brand placements*

The brand placement literature to our knowledge does not contain studies investigating whether valence of the media content (differently) affects explicit versus implicit brand attitudes towards prominently placed brands. The research from an unpublished Master thesis from our own institute (Ten Buuren, 2013) sheds some light on these effects. In an online experiment, real and prominent placements were used from a well-known brand (Jaguar) within the popular television series *Mad Men*. They differed in terms of the valence of the context in which they were placed (positive or negative). Three compilations of *Mad Men* scenes were created, in which only the scenes that included Jaguar differed, but all other scenes were identical and emotionally neutral. In the positive compilation, Jaguar was praised verbally and emotionally by one of the main characters of the series in a marketing pitch for the brand. He described the ultimate feeling of driving a Jaguar car. The negative compilation included a scene with a Jaguar car that failed to start, scenes in which the brand Jaguar is linked to prostitution and corruption, and a scene in which the characters talk about bribing someone at Jaguar. The neutrally-valenced control clip did not include Jaguar, but this clip did contain other brands (Heinz, New York Times, Clearasil) that were not discussed by the main characters.

After watching one of these *Mad Men* clips, participants completed a measure of implicit brand attitudes (Single-Target IAT), followed by self-report measures of explicit brand attitudes (7-point semantic differentials). As expected, the explicit attitudes were affected by the valence of the prominent placement. Particularly, explicit attitudes toward Jaguar were significantly more negative after seeing the negative compilation compared to the neutral compilation (and marginally significantly compared to the positive compilation). No such effect occurred in a positive direction. Thus, in the case of this very prominent placement and clear negative portrayal of the brand, explicit brand attitudes are negatively affected. The analyses of the implicit brand attitudes did not show any valence effect, with equal implicit attitudes toward Jaguar across the valence conditions. These findings should be interpreted with some caution, because the implicit attitude measure was conducted online, which could have led

to unreliable timing of stimulus presentation and response recording for the implicit attitude measure. Still, the preliminary results of this first study are in line with prediction 2a that valence primarily spills over to explicit brand attitudes in the case of prominent placements.

3.2.2 Subtle brand placements

Two studies could shed light on the effects of valence on explicit versus implicit brand attitudes as a result of subtle brand placements, of which one published study focuses on valence transfer in the specific case of advergaming (Waiguny, Nelson, & Marko, 2013). In this experiment, effects were studied of a negative (violent combat) versus neutral (racing) content of advergaming on the explicit and implicit attitude towards the placed brand. The two valence conditions consisted of an advergence for either a familiar brand (LEGO) or an unfamiliar brand (Toyota's brand Scion). After playing the game, participants completed an implicit brand attitude measure (IAT), followed by explicit attitude measures (7-point semantic differentials). For the familiar brand, the analyses did not show a valence effect on implicit brand attitudes. Interestingly, the implicit attitudes toward the unfamiliar brand were negatively affected by the violent game. Unfamiliar brands - which lack a pre-existing attitude - were thus affected by valence of the content in which they are placed. Explicit attitudes toward the brands were not affected by the valence of the content of the game.

In our own study described in section 3.1.2 (Wennekers et al., in progress), we also address the issue of valence transfer to implicit attitudes towards subtly placed brands. In this experiment, we included three brand placement conditions that differed in terms of valence of the media content. For this purpose, three different compilations of the reality TV-show *MasterChef* were created, resulting in a positive, negative and neutral clip. The positive clip consisted of scenes of successful cooking, positive judging, and the nomination of winners, whereas the negative clips contained scenes of clumsy cooking, criticism by the judges, and the elimination of a contestant. The neutral clip included the introduction of candidates, glimpses of the cooking, tasting without explicit judging, and the introduction of the final selection without focusing on the winners or losers. Manipulation checks showed that the clips indeed differed in terms of valence. However, analyses showed that this valence did not transfer to viewers' implicit and explicit brand attitudes. That is, both implicit and explicit attitudes toward the placed brand did not differ between the positive, negative, or neutral condition.

Thus, prediction 2b is not supported by the available evidence except for unfamiliar brands in the study of Waiguny et al. (2013). As posited in section 2.2, there is a possible alternative explanation, which would predict that implicit brand attitudes are not susceptible to the valence of the media content. That is, prediction 2_alternative suggests that mere exposure principles may have a

stronger influence than evaluative conditioning principles, such that repeated exposure to a brand results in more positive evaluations, regardless of the context in which the brand is presented. This prediction cannot be tested for the Waiguny et al. (2013) paper, because this experiment did not include no-placement control conditions. Our own experiment (Wennekers et al., in progress) did include such a control condition and thus allows for a preliminary test of this prediction. The results showed that implicit brand attitudes were positively affected by the brand placement (as compared to the no-placement condition), but that the implicit brand attitudes did not differ across the three valence conditions. Thus, subtle brand placements positively affected implicit brand attitudes, regardless of the valence of the context in which the brands were placed. These findings provide preliminary evidence for the alternative prediction that implicit brand attitudes may improve due to mere exposure to subtle brand placements, rather than being affected by evaluative conditioning in which valence of the context spills over to implicit brand attitudes. However, further direct tests of this hypothesis are needed to support or reject this preliminary conclusion.

3.2.3 Conclusion

To conclude, few studies addressed the question of valence transfer of brand placements on explicit versus implicit brand attitudes. Still, the (published and unpublished) studies reviewed here provide some interesting preliminary insights. For prominent placements, findings indicate that valence transfers to explicit but not implicit brand attitudes. For subtle placements, results are mixed. Two studies using familiar brands show no effects of valence of the media content on implicit brand attitudes, whereas one study using unfamiliar brands does find implicit valence transfer effects. Across these studies, explicit attitudes remain unaffected by valence. Interestingly, in one study we found indications for mere exposure findings over evaluative conditioning effects. That is, merely exposing people to a familiar brand in media content with a positive, negative, or neutral valence seemed to positively affect implicit brand attitudes, regardless of the valence of the media content. Future studies should be performed to further test these suggestions about valence transfer in brand placement research. Such work should measure explicit versus implicit brand attitudes and investigate potential boundary conditions, such as familiarity of the brands.

4 General conclusion and future research agenda

The goal of this chapter was to discuss the role of implicit evaluative processes in brand placement effects. We started this chapter emphasizing the distinction between explicit and implicit attitudes. In sum, these two types of attitudes are the result of different evaluative processes (propositional versus

associative), should be measured with distinct procedures (direct self-report measures versus indirect behavioral measures), and they predict different types of behaviors (deliberative versus impulsive). Next, we discussed how different kinds of brand placements might differently affect explicit and implicit attitudes, resulting in two predictions that were tested using existing (published and unpublished) brand placement studies. Even though there are only a few studies so far including measures of implicit brand attitudes, this short review of the literature provides some interesting preliminary insights.

First, prominence of the placement seems to play a role in the type of attitudes that are affected by brand placements. Existing findings are in line with the prediction that prominent placements mainly affect explicit brand attitudes, whereas subtle placements mainly have an effect on implicit brand attitudes. These findings underscore the importance of including implicit brand attitude measures in brand placement studies, especially when the placements are subtle. Including only explicit brand attitude measures could result in the false conclusion that subtle placements do not affect consumers' evaluative responses toward the placed brand, and are thus ineffective. The use of implicit attitude measures suggests that the opposite may be true: The findings discussed in this chapter demonstrate that subtle placements affect implicit brand attitudes. As explained in section 2.1, implicit attitude measures have been found to impact automatic or spontaneous behaviors, whereas explicit attitude measures mainly affect controlled and deliberative behaviors. Because many real-life consumer behaviors are not deliberative (think about impulsive consumption, see for example Dijksterhuis, Smith, van Baaren, & Wigboldus, 2005), implicit attitude measures are essential to gain novel insights into how subtle brand placements affect consumer behavior. Future research should further study the effect of prominence of the placement on explicit versus implicit brand attitudes, and how these different attitudes affect impulsive consumer behaviors.

Second, this chapter explored effects of valence of the brand placement context on explicit and implicit brand attitudes. In order to efficiently use brand placements as a marketing tool, it is important to know whether the strategy enhances consumers' explicit and/or implicit brand attitudes. A relevant question is to what extent the media content in which the brand is placed affects the outcomes. Especially, could placement in a negative context have negative effects on brand attitudes? The findings discussed in this chapter provide some insight into this question. Preliminary findings suggest that prominent placements and explicit negative reference to a brand could harm viewers' explicit brand attitudes. Implicit brand attitudes were not affected by the negative placement, but more research is needed to draw stronger conclusions.

For subtle brand placements a different picture is painted by existing studies. Familiar brands do not seem to be harmed by negative placements. In fact, one study suggests that mere exposure to subtle brand placements might result in

positive implicit brand attitudes, irrespective of the valence of the context. Still, findings of another study suggest that unfamiliar brands might be negatively affected by negative placements. For these brands, people do not yet have evaluative associations, and the negative associations that are activated by the media content then could transfer to these unfamiliar brands. However, these findings were obtained for placements in games, so it needs to be investigated whether these effects generalize to placements in television programs. Future research is also needed to further investigate valence transfer in brand placements, specifically to study different levels of valence extremity and to address the potential moderating role of brand familiarity.

To conclude, this chapter shows the value of studying implicit brand attitudes in brand placement research. Still, available evidence is scarce and this chapter also emphasizes the need for more research in this area. The predictions and suggestions for research directions from this chapter are provided to spark ideas for future investigations of brand placements effects on explicit and implicit brand attitudes and subsequent consumer behavior.

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